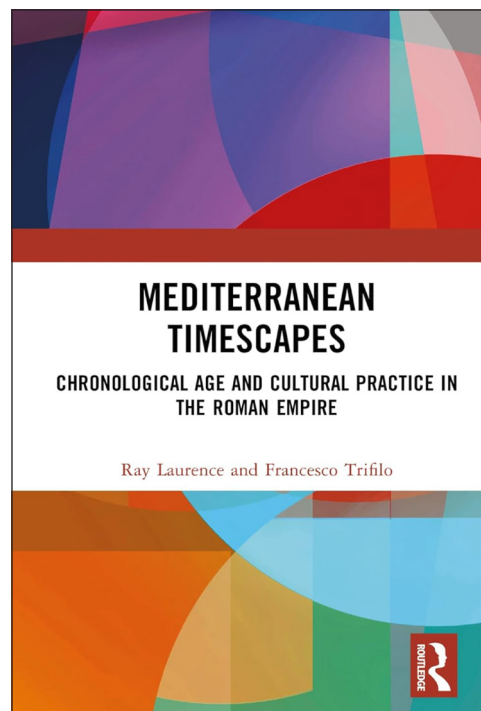


Book Review

Laurence, Ray and Francisco Trifilò. 2023. *Mediterranean Timescapes: Chronological Age and Cultural Practice in the Roman Empire*. London: Routledge; 978-1-13828-875-1 hardback £125.

As many readers of this journal will know, Roman epitaphs not infrequently report the lifespan of the deceased, sometimes with great apparent precision. The basic premise of this study (and one that I think is broadly and correctly accepted by others) is that the distribution of these reported ages is not determined principally by the actual demography of the underlying population. Rather, at least as important are ideologies that dictate when and how to keep track of ages and record them for posterity. This book comprises a set of case studies into these ideologies and what they can tell us about broader social historical questions. The authors work from a database of roughly 23,000 inscriptions. They look at all epitaphs which (a) were in the *Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss/Slaby* in 2009, (b) contain a reliably readable age for the deceased, and (c) came from the Western provinces (including peninsular Italy, but not Corsica, Dalmatia, or — importantly — Rome). The titular ‘timescapes’ (never defined) seem to be the sum total of the cultural constructs that shape the understanding of age at particular times and places.



A database of this size can be approached from many different directions. Some chapters center on differences in terms of the identity of the deceased: gender, personal status, place in a life course, military/civilian or local/migrant. Geographical differences at various scales (city vs. city, province vs. province, region vs. region) are important to many chapters. In some cases, the authors investigate features of the representation itself such as numerical rounding/heaping or the forms in which the formula *vixit annis* is abbreviated (I do wonder why the common abbreviated form *vix* is not considered here, especially given the argument on p. 60 distinguishing the noun and the verb in the formula). Most of the studies are intersectional, observing interactions between two or more of these variables.

The biggest result is perhaps an elaboration of the initial premise. The diversity of results, across so many dimensions and in so many combinations, demands not just cultural explanation in general but a variety of explanations *at a variety of scales*. So, for instance, Chapter 11 goes beyond the well-known emphasis on the elderly in African epitaphs to note local variation (this feature is geographically clumped) and correlation with the seemingly unrelated phenomenon of unusual degrees of age rounding. One of the explanations for the pattern (and others discussed elsewhere in the book) is that age-recording was a cultural pattern particularly associated with close contact with the Roman state, typically in the form of the army. This irregularly distributed feature then interacted with a broader regional tendency to respect age, which was also less concerned with accuracy.

I found little in the book that seemed clearly wrong, but I did recognize a couple of difficulties that were familiar to me from having once conducted a methodologically similar study myself, though one substantively far less ambitious. It is sometimes hard to know what to make of the magnitude of differences in the data. For instance, when looking at commemoration across the life course, the authors show that patterns in Africa are less gendered than those observed in Europe, where the peak age for women is younger than for men (p. 101–102). The general shape of all the curves, however, seems similar, and given the broad age buckets used, it is hard to tell just how far apart the peak ages are. I presume the phenomenon the authors detect is ‘real’, but it is hard to gauge how significant it is (I mean that term in its colloquial sense, not as a matter of formal statistics). Elsewhere, the numerical facts are clearer, but their interpretation is not. For instance, African epitaphs using an abbreviation for the *vixit annis* formula do not show the expected bias toward commemorating the elderly (p. 62–63). The study seems to take the full form as indicative of greater focus on the fact of the deceased’s age. That is not implausible, but one could imagine many other explanations, including correlation with the total length of the text (see p. 59).

The book has a somewhat unusual history, beginning as a collaboration between the authors in 2009. Substantial work was done for a few years, but Trifilò left academia, and Laurence was long distracted by other responsibilities and has only recently been able to return to the project. I report this because I think the history has had two kinds of consequences for the work. On the one hand, in an afterword Laurence discusses how he might now have carried out the project differently, in some ways relating to advances in information technology and others more conceptual. Given the lack of similar work in the interim, I don't think the value of the project has been compromised by the delay. In fact, the time afforded for the reflections in the afterword may actually have enhanced it. On the other hand, the original work was clearly a very close collaboration between the two authors, and I wonder how willing Laurence was to reach new conclusions or discard data that were hard to explain without being able to replace or improve them. It is particularly unfortunate that, despite the authors' efforts at the time of the original study (see Chapter 1, note 12), their public archive of the original data seems no longer to be available. So I cannot, for instance, readily follow up on my question about abbreviations. And what if we wonder how their various results would be affected by choosing different age bands than the 15-year ones they often resort to?

The afterword expresses the hope that, 'the thinking around the data that we did capture has validity and is a jumping-off point for others with new methods and new skill' (p. 242). I fervently hope that younger scholars will indeed take note of Laurence and Trifilò's important proof of concept and launch the kinds of studies Laurence suggests.

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